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## **Hearing: Lebanon Reborn? Defining National Priorities and Prospects for Democratic Renewal in the Wake of March 14, 2005**

### **I. Youth Action Plan**

An initiative of the Delegation of the European Commission in Lebanon, the “Youth Action Plan” was produced and written by students from the American University of Beirut, University of Saint Joseph, and the Lebanese University. *The EC encouraged us to participate in this project in the wake of the assassination of our late Premier Hariri as a vivid attestation of our commitment to national solidarity and determination to advance national reforms.*

### **II. Accomplishments**

- ✓ **The Youth Action Plan was presented to EU ambassadors, Lebanese economists and government officials at ESA on the 10th of June 2005.** An open debate followed giving students the opportunity to defend their recommendations for political, economic, and social reforms before prominent figures in the audience. The event was a success and won mass media coverage and incredible public support for Lebanese youth.
- ✓ **Work is currently in progress to shift into implementation phase.** This requires a close scrutiny of the complete action plan to define the most important and realistic national projects, identify group members that are keen on working on these goals, and focusing all our energies to develop an international network of connections, with a clear emphasis on civil society organizations, research institutions and think tanks, as well as influential figures at home and amongst Lebanese Diaspora. We need all the support that we can obtain.
- ✓ **As group leader, I was the first Lebanese to win a scholarship with the German Council of Foreign Relations in Berlin to present the Youth Action Plan.** This is the first time that this world renowned research institute awards scholarships to participants from the Middle East. It was a big honour to commence the International Summer School, attended by 35 high calibre students and professionals selected from 25 countries worldwide, with our recommendations for a better Lebanon. It proved to be an excellent opportunity to seek feedback from an international audience. Two local German newspapers covered the event to encourage other learning and educational institutions to give opportunities to Arab youth.
- ✓ **I am currently involved in an action plan for the Middle East, sponsored by the Ana Lindh foundation, to promote inter-cultural dialogue between Arab and European youth.** We focus on the importance of educating the West about Islam. Indeed, the Honourable Hyde is correct to note that in

terms of terrorism, “America is not doing a good job of selling its story abroad” or at home one may add, especially in light of the growing discrimination against Muslims and Arabs in general in the US. We hope to join forces with American youth to promote an inter-cultural dialogue that surpasses national borders.

Despite mass media coverage, including local and international newspapers, magazines, and the German press and notwithstanding incredible support of the Daily Star (the best English newspaper sold with Herald Tribune in Lebanon) in publishing our whole project as a supplement with its newspaper on the 8th of July as well as providing it online for all its readers worldwide for the past week, **we fail to gain the attention and recognition of the Lebanese government.** We have asked the government to allow us to present our ideas in parliament with extensive media coverage but to no avail.

### **III. National Priorities**

*We sincerely thank the American government for taking an interest in Lebanese youth and hope that we can work together to build a better future for us all. Lebanese youth are in agreement that our national priorities in the political, economic and social sphere are as follows:*

#### **(A) Political Arena**

1) First and foremost, Lebanese youth refuse to compromise on national sovereignty.

Syria is far from being out of Lebanon (in practical terms). They continue to hold the country hostage, not only by closing the borders to Lebanese goods and arresting fishermen, but also by assassinating prominent writers, and terrorizing the country with mysterious explosions. The Syrians clearly continue to have their agents within the Lebanese security apparatus.

We call on the international community to conduct a persistent and transparent international investigation to discover the truth of February 14 and adopt immediate interventionist measures to put an end to the ensuing chain of terror and political crimes that has ravaged the country since the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq El-Harriri. Lebanese youth seek justice. Without accountability, our future in Lebanon remains grim.

2) We clearly need to develop a more democratic secular and representative system of governance.

We must develop our electoral laws to allow new blood into the stagnating and corrupt political system, respect for our constitution, and a system of checks and balances to control the power of the president. A staunch Syrian supporter, Emile Lahoud modified the constitution to extend his term of presidency.

Lebanese youth have developed a progressive plan of action to move away from sectarianism, seen as a debilitating social force in our community. Some of the proposals we recommend include focusing on youth policies that promote inter-sectarian community services at a young age; the basic teaching of all religions as a fundamental part of the national curriculum; a youth driven project supported by the EU to develop a national history book to be taught in all schools in Lebanon.

On 1559, Lebanese youth would like to state simple facts that remain largely ignored by the international community. With one and a half million Shiites in Lebanon mostly loyal to Nasrallah, and bearing into consideration that Hezbollah has won 12 seats in our government, it is very hard to sell Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in Lebanon. It is not the weapons of Hezbollah that makes them an influential party; rather, it is the profound loyalty of their followers and the largely incompetent Lebanese state that has allowed Hezbollah and other political sects and leaders to provide basic subsistence to rural communities.

Lebanese youth want more women to be given the opportunity to pursue a career in politics. We call for a temporary and obligatory quota arrangement to allow women a fundamental initial foothold into the largely closed political system.

3) We need to protect the rule of law as a fundamental building block in our society. In Lebanon there is a significant gap between the law and its implementation. We call for a complete reform of the judiciary to ensure that it is independent from the political system.

4) We call on the international community to assist us to safeguard the freedom of the press. The assassination of Samir Kassir is a national tragedy that necessitates the stepping up of all security measures to protect our most scared national asset.

5) We must pursue an open political dialogue to safeguard all human rights, including the rights of women, children, and the elderly. Hundreds of Palestinians continue to live in abysmal conditions in camps. It is not enough for the Lebanese government to allow them the right to work. With the continued support and financial assistance of the international community, we must grant all Palestinians their basic human rights.

6) We need to create an environment that fosters citizenship and solidarity between Lebanese nationals at home and amongst the Lebanese Diaspora. We favour greater involvement of the Lebanese Diaspora in domestic affairs and have called on them to take active measures to vote in the Lebanese embassies of their countries in the future.

## **(B) Economic Priorities**

1) Our primary concern is management of the growing public debt in conjunction with good governance. We also need to develop a more effective monetary and fiscal policy, and continue the drive towards privatization.

2) We need to further develop the water, industry, agriculture, and energy sectors as well as maintain our lead position in the financial services sector in the region.

3) We recommend improving foreign direct investment through more effective investment laws, less bureaucratic procedures, and greater access to reliable information and statistics.

4) We seek support for Small-to-Medium enterprises and entrepreneurial initiatives in general as an important step towards developing a middle class in Lebanon.

5) We are adamant to develop sustainable tourism and disseminate a positive image of our country.

### **(C) Social Priorities**

1) We need to take active measures to manage poverty and promote durable national development through the implementation of Lebanese Development Plan (2002-2006).

2) We find it essential to invest more funds in public education and health (especially in rural areas), and develop a social welfare system in general.

3) We make several recommendations for reforming our national curriculum to allow it to emerge as a more flexible, pragmatic, and open system of educational learning. We need financial assistance to develop the first respectable public library and think tank in the country.

3) We highlight the need for a nationwide project to fight against smoking and drug abuse. We urge the government and international community to control drug trafficking along the border especially in light of the vast Hashish yield in the Bekaa valley.

4) We demand the legalization of optional civil marriage as an important starting point in managing sectarianism and securing equal rights for women.

5) We propose the consolidation of communication networks between national, regional, and international environmental NGO's to pursue more effective environmental governance.

### **IV. Concluding Statement**

As government officials at home and abroad, intellectuals, journalists, members of the international community... join together in intellectual circles to discuss the future of Lebanon and fathom nice titles like "the rebirth of democracy..." the assassination site of our late premier Rafiq el-Harriri- two blocks away from the HSBC building where I used to work in Ain Mreisseh- remains closed with burnt cars debris and a hoard of idle security men proving to be no more and no less that a constant reminder of government failure corruption and international negligence. Lebanese youth watch in complete despair as the same government officials resume office

once again, making a complete mockery of our desperate cry for national reforms. Every explosion in this seeming jungle is an attack on our national sovereignty, values, and aspirations for a stable secure and prosperous Lebanon. We urge the United States of America and the international community to help us to surpass these difficult times by doing more than raising the flag of democracy justice and world peace.

Thank you.